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ABSTRACT

Studies using social power theory constructs (French and Raven, 1959) to analyze compliance attempts in field settings show that the power bases are not consistently related to any subordinate outcome variables such as job performance or attitudes. A study was undertaken to test key hypotheses derived from the social power theory concerning outcomes arising from power base use by managers in organizations. It was hypothesized that: (1) Expert and Referent powers, the bases framing the least obtrusive compliance attempts, would be positively correlated with job performance of subordinates; (2) Coercive and Legitimate powers, where the compliance attempts are the most obtrusive, would be significantly correlated with both role ambiguity and conflict; and (3) Reward power, the power most constrained by organizational systems, would show no significant relationship with any outcome. A scale drawn from French and Raven definitions was administered to supervisors in a large organization. Supervisors indicated how often they performed each behavior described on the scale. Subordinates described their role ambiguity and role conflict perceptions using a role stress scale. A measure of their job performance was also obtained. Support for the hypotheses was found. These results appear to indicate that unobtrusiveness and nonthreatening compliance attempts may lead to better group performance on the job. More traditional work motivators such as Reward and Coercive power do not appear to have comparable beneficial effects. (Author/NB)

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Abstract

Social power theory as first proposed by French and Raven in 1959 has achieved wide familiarity in both Psychology and Management contexts. A review of studies using these power constructs to analyze compliance attempts in field settings shows that the power bases are not consistently related to any subordinate outcome variables such as job performance or attitudes and perhaps this is due to the lack of adequate operational definitions for the bases, (Podsakoff & Schriesheim, 1985.) The purpose of this study is to test some key hypotheses derived from the social power theory that concern outcomes arising from power base use by managers in organizations utilizing a scale with sufficient construct validity to capture the full theoretical meaning of each power base.

The hypotheses are as follows. Expert and Referent powers, the bases framing the least obtrusive compliance attempts, will be positively correlated with job performance of subordinates. This hypothesis can be derived from Podsakoff & Schriesheim's, (1985,) conclusion that these powers are most consistently linked to job performance. Coercive and Legitimate powers, where the compliance attempts are the most obtrusive, will be significantly correlated with both role ambiguity and conflict, two indicants of job stress among subordinates. Previous reviews have shown these powers are associated with reactance perceptions. Reward power, the power most constrained by organizational systems, will show no significant relationship with any outcome.

To test these hypotheses a new 17 item scale which was written drawing from the French and Raven definitions, (Frost & Stahelski, 1987,) was used as a self report measure by supervisors in a large organization. Each was asked to indicate how often they performed each behavior described on the scale. Subordinates were asked for their role ambiguity and role conflict perceptions using a role stress scale developed by Rizzo, House and Lirtzman, (1970.) A measure of their job performance was also obtained.

Support for the hypotheses was found. These results appear to indicate that unobtrusiveness and nonthreatening compliance attempts may lead to better group perfomance on the job. More traditional work motivators, carrots, (i.e., Reward power,) and sticks, (i.e., Coercive power,) do not appear to have comparable beneficial effects.

Modern Managers Move Away from the Carrot and Stick Approach

Attempts to define the work of a manager always include supervision of others as a key characteristic. In fact, in many definitions management includes many professionals who do not supervise, nonetheless the task of proper supervision remains the major preoccupation of many managers. Managers that do supervise employees are confronted on an every day basis with the problem of motivating those employees toward organizational goals. Supervising managers faced with this motivational task need to decide which motivational tools are best used when and with whom. A manager can use the basic tools of rewarding productive behavior or punishing non-productive behavior. A manager can also motivate by using the legitimate authority vested in his or her position, or by using the expert knowledge he or she gains on the job over time. And finally a manager can use the affection and positive sense of identification that subordinates have for him or her as the basis for motivating them.

These five motivational tools have been studied in Organizational and Social Psychology within a theoretical framework known as the social bases of power. This theory, first proposed by French and Raven, (1959,) has achieved wide familiarity in both Psychology and Management texts. In spite of it's longevity and popularity, Social Power Theory has yet to be adequately defined in operational terms. The purpose of this paper is to test some key hypotheses concerning the outcomes arising from the use of the power bases by managers in realistic orgainizational settings, using a measurement scale sufficient

in its operationalizations of the theoretical constructs of social power.

Social Power Theory's theoretical constructs are briefly described here before considering past research results. Reward power involves giving positive reinforcement to motivate productive work, and it is based on having access to commodities that others value. Coercive power, (or punishment power,) involves the potential to deliver aversive outcomes and punishment to force a subordinate to change his or her behavior and, as in the previous case, it is based on access to resources that increase the strength and credibility of the threat. Legitimate power is authority derived from being in a particular organizational role or position, which is in turn based on the norm that subordinates should obey the orders of a superior. Expert power is based on having knowledge about a particular area that others value and need to perform productive work. Referent power is based on a subordinate's desire to identify with and be similar to a liked and esteemed supervisor.

Social Power Theory is one of the few theoretical systems in Social Psychology that has been studied extensively in field settings, (Podsakoff & Schriesheim, 1985.) However, in spite of the large number of studies there are few relationships with outcome variables that have been consistently demonstrated across studies. In their review and critique of Social Power Theory, Podsakoff & Schriesheim faulted previous studies, (Bachman, Bowers, & Marcus, 1968; Burke & Wilcox, 1971; Busch, 1980; Cobb, 1980; Cope, 1972; Dunne, Stahl & Melhart,

1987; Hammer, 1978; Ivancevich, 1970; Ivancevich & Donnelly, 1970; Martin & Hunt, 1980; Sheridan & Vredenburgh, 1978; Slocum, 1970; Student, 1968; Thamhain & Gemmill, 1974; Warren, 1968; Wieland, 1969,) for a number of methodological and analytical shortcomings. Most importantly, the scales typically used in these studies, (from Bachman, et. al., 1968; Student, 1968; Thamhain & Gemmill, 1974,) are single item operationalizations which appear to lack content validity when compared to the French and Raven, (1959,) original construct statements. Secondly, the scales used are frequently ordinal rankings, only a few studies have collected data using a Likert-type response format to attempt interval level scaling, (e.g., Bachman, et. al., 1968; Busch, 1980; Cobb, 1980; Martin & Hunt, 1980; Warren, 1968.) Third, the scales use attributional rather than behavioral referents, (e. g., "Why did you comply?",) which cause confounding by social desirability and attributional biases. Fourth, in the reviewed studies the data regarding leaders' power base usage and the data on the subordinates' outcomes comes from the same subjects, a technique which contributes to the common method variance confound. And finally, the reviewed studies used grouped or pooled estimates of the supervisor's behavior, an analysis technique which assumes that leaders use the same powers to influence all subordinates similarly even though recent work has questioned such assumptions, (Dansereau, Graen & Haga, 1975.)

Podsakoff & Schriesheim, (1985,) call upon future researchers of social power effects to specifically address the shortcomings listed

above. The study presented here is an attempt to respond to this request. The scale utilized here presents multi-item operationalizations of each power base, using Likert-type response categories, and behavioral referents. The data analysis compares the leaders' own assessments of their power base usage with subordinates' own assessments of their job attitudes, using individual level comparisons in each instance.

An examination of prior research utilizing single-item Linkert scaling measures for these power bases reveals four studies on the impact of power use upon subordinates' outcomes, (Bachman, et. al., 1968; Busch, 1980; Cobb, 1980; Martin & Hunt, 1980.) Analysis of the results of these investigations lead the authors of this study to the following hypotheses regarding each power base and its correlation with subordinates' job performance and job perceptions. Expert and Referent powers, the bases framing the least obtrusive compliance attempts, will be positively correlated with job performance of subordinates.

The power most constrained by organizational systems will show no significant relationship with any outcome. Coercive and Legitimate powers, where the compliance attempts are most obtrusive, will be significantly correlated with both role ambiguity and conflict, two indicants of job stress among subordinates. The purpose of this analysis is to verify and expand these conclusions from prior studies using a scale assessing the content domain of each of these power bases more completely.

Method

Power Use Questionnaire

A 17 item scale was written drawing from the French and Raven, (1959,) definitions for each power base, (Frost & Stahelski, 1987.) Supervisors were asked to indicate how often they performed each behavior described on a 5-point Likert-type scale, (1= "Seldom" and 5= "Very Often.") From the 17 items five sub-scales corresponding to each social power base are constructed, (see Table 1,) including four items covering Reward and Expert powers, and three items each for Coercive, Legitimate and Referent powers.

Insert Table 1 about here

Outcome Variables

Measures on three subordinate outcome variables were obtained to assess the relation of the power use questionnaire responses to important effects upon followers. The first of these, subordinate's job performance, was obtained by asking the superiors to rate each of their subordinates in terms of their overall performance using a seven-point response scale, (1= "Poor" to 7= "Superior.") The mean rating was 4.60, (s.d. = 1.65,) which indicated acceptable variance in the ratings was obtained.

As a more complete measure of role ambiguity, a role perception scale developed by Rizzo, House & Lirtzman, (1970,) measured role ambiguity stress, (a total of six items such as "I know what my responsibilities are,") and role conflict stress, (eight items such

as "I receive incompatible requests from two or more people.") Subordinates responded to each item by indicating the degree to which the condition existed for their job using a seven-point scale ranging from "Very true" to "Very false." The mean for the role ambiguity scale was 32.49, (s.d. = 4.61,) and for the role conflict scale it was 28.86, (s.d. = 6.76.)

Sample

Data were collected from leaders in a large civil service organization employing approximately 1,000 people. The subordinate outcome measures were collected from 123 individuals with similar job duties. A second group included 19 respondents who are the first group's immediate superiors. Subjects were all males and had a minimum of one year of supervisory experience within this organization.

Procedure

The scales discussed in this paper were part of a larger research study and included within a survey all subjects received in groups of about 20 at a time. Individuals were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and were given time to discuss the study's purposes after their responses were collected. All subjects contacted agreed to participate.

The subordinates were asked for their role conflict and role ambiguity perceptions. Their immediate supervisors were asked to report their use of the five power bases so that the impact of their power use could be related to their subordinates' performance and stress ratings.

Results

Items on the five social power scales were summed to produce a frequency of use score. These scores were then correlated with the three subordinate outcome measures obtained. Intercorrelations between the outcome measures showed a correlation of .36, (N=121, P<.001,) between the role ambiguity and conflict scales. Neither role perception measure correlated significantly with job performance. Table 2 shows the product-moment correlations for these three outcomes and the five social power scales indicating the supervisors' self-reports of frequency of use for each base of power.

Insert Table 2 about here

These results confirm that Expert and Referent powers are positively related to subordinate job performance, (r =.22 & .16.) Two well accepted measures of role stress were collected, (i.e., role ambiguity and conflict,) while in two prior studies data on role clarity and goal clarity were collected, (Busch, 1980; Wieland, 1969,) which are concepts most similar to the more frequently studied role ambiguity scale used here. Coercive and Legitimate powers were significantly correlated to three of the four possible outcome measures of role stress. And, as predicted, Reward power showed no significant correlations with any of the outcome measures.

Discussion

Practically speaking, managers should take notice of the job performance correlations with the social power bases. Directions

phrased in terms of Expert or Referent powers leads to better performance by subordinates and phrasing demands in terms of rewards and punishers, or by rightful authority, have less of a connection to performance but frequently leads to job stress among subordinates. The suggestion that managers should emphasize the carrot, (i.e., rewards,) and not the stick, (i.e., punitive threats,) when directly communicating task requirements may not be justified. In fact, these results argue for reliance upon expert knowledge or interpersonal commitments, (Expert and Referent powers, respectively,) in gaining compliance from subordinates. It appears that co-workers show less reactance to these types of compliance attempts, that they prefer subtley to more obvious demands. Being nice may have its merits, but subtlety may be even more important.

Noteworthy among the results reported here is the positive relationship demonstrated between a subordinate's job stress, (e.g., role conflict and role ambiguity,) and the supervisor's frequency of compliance attempts using his or her social power. With only one exception, (i.e., Reward power,) any assertion of social power by the more powerful superior led to perceptions of greater role conflict among subordinates. When the construct of role conflict is examined in this context these results are not surprising. Role conflict may be defined as conflicting requests from others, incompatible standards of evaluation, and conflict between the time, resources, or capabilities available to meet the role demands expressed, (Rizzo, et.al., 1970.) That Reward power assertions should not be as stressful makes sense

since opportunities for gains should not lead to conflict, as does the fact that Coercive power should have the strongest association with conflict and stress. This correlation with job stress means that managers may have to weigh the costs and benefits of using their social power; such compliance demands may lead to better performance but also greater role stress for their group.

Social power assertions were also shown to be correlated with role ambiguity; Legitimate power and this stress correlated positively. Role ambiguity is the lack of the necessary information needed to perform one's assigned work, a question of incomplete or vague directions. Legitimate power is unique in that it provides little or no task relevant communication. Compliance demands based on greater authority or status may also threaten a subordinate's willingness to later approach a superior for needed directions or clarification, compounding the difficulty.

A major difference between this study's design and previous reports' designs is the collection of power base use data from a separate source from that of the outcome reports. Common method variance may have inflated results and it may have led to other confounds such as the social desirability bias. The rater's attempts to maintain consistency among responses may have led to evidence of a casual relationship between these factors which is more apparent than real. This study's correlations for Reward power were nonsignificant and near zero for all outcomes examined, this may also be attributed to the use independent sources for these ratings here.

Indeed, subordinates may view the offer of organizationally recognized rewards, (e.g., promotions, awards,) not as a leadership attempt but merely as the proper administration of the organization's reward system, while the superior sees it as a direct compliance attempt. Clearly further study is needed to determine the true content domain of Reward power and to ascertain the degree of agreement between supervisors' self-ratings of this power and their subordinates' ratings of that same behavior.

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Table 1

Scale Items Listed by Power

Reward Power

1. Promote them or recommend them for promotion.
2. Recommend them for awards or commendations.
3. Give them high performance ratings.
4. Give them extra time off.

Coercive Power

1. Recommend them for disciplinary action or reprimands.
2. Chew them out.
3. Give them extra work as punishment.

Legitimate Power

1. Let them know that you have a right to expect to have your orders followed.
2. Expect that your orders and requests will be carried out because you're the boss and they will not question an order from a superior.
3. Expect them to follow your orders because they realize that you probably have information that they don't have and therefore a good reason for issuing any order.

Expert Power

1. Advise and assist them.
2. Make on the spot corrections.
3. Give them good assignments.
4. Give them bad assignments.

Referent Power

1. Rely on your good relations with them to get the job done.
2. Rely on them to get the job done because they don't want to let you down.
3. Set the example and rely upon them to follow your example.

Table 2

Correlations Between Use of Power and Subordinate Outcomes

Power	Job Performance	Role Ambiguity	Role Conflict
Reward	.07 (87)	.05 (98)	-.03 (97)
Coercive	.00 (96)	-.07 (107)	.27** (106)
Legitimate	.00 (96)	.24** (107)	.17* (106)
Expert	.22* (96)	-.04 (107)	.17* (106)
Referent	.16* (96)	.09 (107)	.17* (106)

*p<.05

**p<.01